

# Loneliness in later life lessens when older adults spend many hours volunteering, shows study

February 13 2023, by Jared Wadley

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Strawberry Burrell (left), a resident of Detroit, and Detroit River Story Lab participant, works with a volunteer building a boat that the students will test in the Detroit River. Credit: Eric Bronson, Michigan Photography

Volunteering not only fulfills a sense of purpose for older adults by helping others, it also can alleviate loneliness, especially when volunteering more than 100 hours per year, according to a University of Michigan study.

Loneliness among [older adults](#) is a major public health problem. Numerous research studies have consistently documented the adverse effects of [loneliness](#) on mortality, physical and [mental health](#), cognitive functions, and health behaviors.

The U-M study, which appears in the *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, examined the connection between volunteering and the occurrence of loneliness among older adults. What made this study different from other published works were the number of years after follow-up and if there were differences based on gender.

Researchers used data from the Health and Retirement Study (2006-2018), and the sample included 5,000 individuals aged 60 and over who did not experience loneliness in 2006. Participants reported how often they were in formal volunteer work—or efforts done under the management of an organization: none, less than 100 hours per year or more than 100 hours per year. They were also asked about the frequency of feeling lonely.

At the 12-year follow-up, individuals who reported more than 100 hours per year were associated with a lower risk of loneliness compared to non-volunteers. This protective effect was not observed for those who volunteered less than 100 hours per year, the study indicated.

The [benefits](#) of volunteering in mitigating loneliness did not differ by gender, said Joonyoung Cho, the study's lead author and doctoral student of psychology and [social work](#).

**More information:** Joonyoung Cho et al, The Relationship Between Volunteering and the Occurrence of Loneliness Among Older Adults: A Longitudinal Study with 12 Years of Follow-Up, *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/01634372.2022.2139322](https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2022.2139322)

Provided by University of Michigan

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